

Theater and Performance

Pre-Colonial Theater and Performance

In centuries before European settlement, there was an active indigenous performance culture in this region; including dramatized songs, rituals, social dances, and enacted ritual narratives. The oldest of these were found with nomadic communities such as the Khoisan, whose ceremonial and ritualistic dramas and dances are dated by anthropologists at over six thousand years. The various Bantu people who would later inhabit the area had similar performance forms, including the well-known Xhosa intsoni and the Zulu inganekwane, storytelling practices which are still performed today. The same is true of their extensive dance and music traditions. Some forms have survived into the twenty-first century in adapted or hybridized form, especially from the late 1940s onwards, by becoming a dominant feature of the theater after 1970. By the 1990s, artists like storyteller Gcina Mhlope, playwright Matsemela Manaka, the dance company JazzArt, musicians David Kramer and Taliep Peterson, and playmakers Mark Fleishman and Brett Bailey, were consciously seeking to revive such traditions in performance through teaching the forms and even making them mainstream art forms.

Theater and Performance After 1652

The European colonization of the Cape in 1652 introduced new cultural norms and traditions that dominated this region for over three centuries. Under the Dutch (1652 to 1799), there was little record of formal theater. But, the so-called “rederykerskamers”, which were social clubs aimed at cultural, moral, and educational upliftment, maintained until the 1890s, was to be an important basis for the later dominant Afrikaans language theater.

However, formal institutionalized theater only came with the British rule of the region (1799-1910); when some governors encouraged amateur theater in the garrisons and among the

civilians, and supported visits by professional companies from the mother country and colonies in the east. The construction of the still extant *African Theater* (1800) in Cape Town by Sir George Yonge was a landmark event in this regard. This tradition eventually provided the key models for local theatermakers - both descendants of European immigrants and aspirant indigenous African thespians. Initially, they did very little locally written work, with most of the materials being standard European texts (English, Dutch, German, and even French for a while); including a great deal of Shakespeare—both in the original and the translated languages. What was original was usually a short topical prologue or epilogue or a musical skit of some sort. An excellent example is the bilingual skit, *Kaatje Kekkelbek* or *Life Among the Hottentots*, devised in Grahamstown by Andrew Geddes Bain and Frederick Rex in about 1844.

The first substantial body of indigenous plays was written primarily in Dutch (and later in the so-called “Kitchen Dutch” or “Afrikaans”) by descendants of the original white settlers as well as by Dutch speaking slaves and mixed race peoples in the Cape. For example, a slave called Majiet wrote protest plays for performance in the slave lodge, while Dutch and French immigrants (e.g. Suasso de Lima, Boniface, and Melt Brink) produced short one-act farces and satires for performance by amateurs and schools; and a few more serious writers wrote ponderous nationalistic works on the history and struggles of the “Afrikaner” peoples.

The Early Twentieth Century

This tradition bore significant fruits in the twentieth century, especially after Louis Leipold’s professional production of one-act tragedy *Die Heks* (“The Witch” 1925), which proved that Afrikaans was a viable dramatic language. Many other Afrikaans literary figures now turned to the theater as a vehicle in their search for the Afrikaner identity, a movement accelerated by the

founding of the first two professional Afrikaans touring companies formed by Paul de Groot and Hendrik Hanekom in 1925. By 1940, there were about 30 on the road.

In contrast, few indigenously written English plays had been produced in the 19th and in the early years of the 20th century as the only truly successful playwright was Stephen Black, whose popular farces (e.g. *Helena's Hope* 1908 and *Love and the Hyphen* 1910) satirized the multi-racial Cape Town society. The global market competition was just too strong and a truly local tradition of writing in English would only be established in the 1960s, when the cultural boycott deprived the country of access to the best of European and American theater and opened up a market for local work.

Black theatrical work was initially limited to the traditional performance forms – dance, songs, and narrative, as in the previous centuries. But gradually, under the tutelage of missionary schools and other European organizations, an interest in formal European play production and playwriting emerged, though the plays were often intended for use as textbooks for schools rather than for production – this is particularly true of the many plays in indigenous African languages published over the century. The Anglo-American influence on playwriting in black communities was evident early on; as shown in the more ambitious works such as the first published Xhosa drama (Guybon Sinxo's *Debeza's Baboons* 1927) and in Herbert Dhlomo's *The Girl Who Killed to Save: Nonqause the Liberator*, the first play by a black person published in English. Based on a Xhosa legend, it is in the style of English sentimental comedy and melodrama despite its underlying critical stance.

While formal black middle-class theater before the 1960s reflects a taste for European dramatic literature; another popular form was emerging among the black working-class, spearheaded by Esau Mtetwa, who founded the first black professional troupe called Lucky Stars

in Natal in 1926. This group toured the country to put on popular sketches and plays based on Zulu legends and customs in the vernacular. When rapid urbanization in the 1930s and the 1940s led to the growth of economically depressed, mixed race areas and slums in the cities; the result was an increasing synthesis of ethnic performance traditions with the Worker Theater and Western forms based especially on the American models. Through the creative combinations of ethnic and jazz music with ethnic and international dances, a new and distinctive theatrical form emerged in the country. This is best typified by the hit musical *King Kong* (1959). This collaborative play about the rise and fall of a heavyweight boxer brought African musicians and actors to the attention of theater establishments at home and abroad and became an inspiring example for black actors and directors who saw in it the commercial and artistic possibilities blending both indigenous and imported conventions.

State-Funded and Commercial Theater at Mid-Century

White theater was privileged from the start, since it had a captive local audience in a population trained to value European cultural forms. It was also helped by the National Party government's direct subsidies of theater, initially through the bilingual (Afrikaans and English) state funded *National Theater Organization* (1947-1962), and then through four bilingual provincial performing arts councils – PACT, PACOFS, NAPAC, and CAPAB - which evolved from it (1963-1993). These institutions were a home for the cream of the country's white acting and directing talent for many years as they produced fine versions of international classics and hits over the years, both in English and in Afrikaans translation. Most original works produced were by Afrikaans-language playwrights, among which N.P. Van Wyk Louw, André P. Brink, and P.G. du Plessis (whose urban tragedy *Siener in die Suburbs* - "Seer in the Suburbs" 1971-broke all box-office records and won numerous awards), with a few English playwrights such as Guy

Butler and James Ambrose Brown seeing their plays on stage. The new work focused exclusively on South African themes, seeking to develop a distinctively South African idiom, but few writers would achieve the sustained success of key Afrikaans dramatists, until the late 1980's and the 1990s. Thus far, none have achieved Athol Fugard's international stature.

Alongside the state-funded system, a strong commercial theater industry has long existed in the country, from touring companies "Playing the Empire" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and vast conglomerates like *African Consolidated Theaters* that sponsored theaters and productions throughout the Union, to smaller urban companies doing both European and American fare (e.g. Leonard Rayne and Brian Brooke) and the local Afrikaans touring companies. In the 1970-1990 periods, entrepreneurs like Taubie Kushlick and Pieter Toerien managed to bypass the international playwrights' boycott and produce primarily American and British hits. After 1990, Toerien and others began to bring large-scale hits from Broadway, the West End, and the European capitals to South Africa; including *Les Miserables*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and ironically, *The Lion King*.

A special category of musical - the so-called "tribal musical" (later the "African musical") - developed after 1945. Rooted in the 19th century tradition of circuses and exhibitions of "authentic" African scenes, this work merged indigenous performance elements with jazz and contemporary dance to produce hybrid musicals like *King Kong*, Welcome Msomi's *Umabatha* (a Zulu adaptation of *Macbeth*- 1970), and Bertha Egnos's collaborative *Ipi-Tombi* (1974). Later came David Kramer and Taliep Petersen's successful "Coloured musical": *District Six – The Musical* (1987), Mbongeni Ngema's popular musicals: *Sarafina*, *Magic at 4:00 A.M.* and *The Zulu*, and Richard Loring's *African Footprint* in 2004. Even though criticized as inauthentic and

exploitative of indigenous culture, these commercially successful productions created work and training opportunities for many performers excluded from the state system.

An influential side effect of this development was the emergence of the so called “township musical”: a scaled down, touring version of the big musicals, usually based on melodramatic local stories. The notable catalyst in this was the legendary entrepreneur Gibson Kente (1932-2004), whose musical plays toured the black townships for years during the 1970s and the 1980s. He not only turned black citizens into theatergoers, but also popularized his form to such an extent that it established a vast industry. His form would also be snapped up and adapted as an effective medium by the political movements of the time.

Theater and Resistance

By the late 1950s, frustration with politics and the arts system had set in among theatermakers and artists across language and cultural divides. Some entrepreneurs did politically relevant plays from Europe and America as well as indigenous anti-apartheid plays such as Basil Warner’s *Try for White* (Leonard Schach 1958), Lewis Sowden’s *Kimberley Train* (Leon Gluckman 1959), and Athol Fugard’s *The Blood Knot* (1961). However, the tighter censorship and racial laws of the 1960s put a virtual end to the trend for a while, so a search began for alternative ways to continue to resist and also to co-ordinate and support black and multi-racial work. It would lead to what is possibly the most inspiring and fruitful period of theater in the country—1970-1990.

Within the state system of performing arts councils; Ken Leach, Pieter Fourie, Francois Swart, and others did subversive work in experimental venues, including plays by outspoken critics of apartheid such as André P. Brink, Bartho Smit, and Adam Small, though not always without controversy. For example, Smit’s *Christine* (written in 1971 and performed by *PACT* in

1973) and Small's *Kanna hy kô Huistoe* ("Kanna Comes Home", written in 1965 and performed by *PACOFs* in 1971), both ran foul of censorship laws.

At the same time, younger white and black activist-theatermakers were working together, seeking to create important multi-cultural fringe groups outside the state system. A key early example was *Union Artists*, whose Dorkay House venue became a focal point of where they supported and mentored many artists. They were also involved in the influential *King Kong* project. Others include *Theater Workshop '71* and *Junction Avenue Theater Company*.

This process was strongly affected by another parallel process, the radical increase in national and international resistance to apartheid and the burgeoning Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s, which led to a radical change in black resistance politics and a focus on cultural liberation through an alternative, black South African aesthetic. During this time, trade union workers' theater also became an important tool to foster union solidarity and to develop political awareness among black workers. Much of this latter work was linked to Brechtian's theories and to Boal's notions of forum theater, all crucial elements in the later political theater. Particularly militant political works emerged from groups like *People's Experimental Theater* and the *Theater Council of Natal* in the mid-1970s, which in turn led to a radical shift towards political theater and what would become known for a while as "black theater".

The most crucial factor, however, was the founding of a number of independent venues in the 1970s – particularly the *Space Theater* in Cape Town (1972-1979) and the *Market Theater* in Johannesburg (1976-), venues not controlled through state funding. Focusing on developing theater projects that addressed the cultural contradictions of South African life, they found ways to circumvent the racial laws. A key achievement was to provide a performance space for significant black theatermakers such as Fatima Dike (*The Sacrifice of Kreli* 1976), Maishe

Maponya *The Hungry Earth* 1979), Matsemela Manaka (*Pula* 1986), and Zakes Mda (*We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* 1973 and *The Hill* 1979). Among all these writers, Athol Fugard's steady stream of trenchant plays still dominated much of the period, including his later masterpieces (*Hello and Goodbye* 1965, *Boesman and Lena* 1969, *Master Harold and the Boys* 1982, and *The Road to Mecca* 1987). His simple but compelling neo-naturalism became the model for young theatermakers such as Paul Slabolepszy, Anthony Akerman, Pieter-Dirk Uys, Deon Opperman, Reza de Wet and others; who began to produce significant new works to add their voices to the clamor for change in the 1980s, beginning with Slabolepszy's *Saturday Night at the Palace* (1982) and leading to De Wet's award-winning Gothic dramas about the Afrikaner psyche. Another phenomenon was the rise of the satirist and stand-up comedian as political activist – the most notable example being the immensely effective Pieter-Dirk Uys and his alter ego, Evita Bezuidenhout, with constantly updated shows like *Adapt or Dye* (1981).

The other immense influence of the resistance period was a distinct shift toward improvised political theater, in which the previously neglected African traditions become dominant. Inspired by the earlier improvised works such as: *Theater Workshop '71 (The Women of Crossroads* 1973); John Kani, Winston Ntshona, and Athol Fugard (*The Island* 1973 and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* 1972); and Barney Simon (*Cincinatti* 1979 and *Born in the RSA* 1985), these plays tended to incorporate aspects of pre-colonial African genres into their more formal structures and blend these with the new urban cultural experiences of their audiences. This is best epitomized by Barney Simon, Mbongeni Ngema, and Percy Mtwa's seminal *Woza Albert* (1981), Ngema's *Asinamali* (1985), and *Junction Avenue Theater's* groundbreaking *Sophiatown* (1986). A distinctive South African form by the 1990s, these hybrid forms continued to develop with haunting works by William Kentridge and the *Handspring Puppet Company* (*Woyzeck on the*

Highfeld 1992 and *Faustus in Africa* 1995), Mark Fleishman and the *Magnet Theater Company* and *Jazzart* (*Rain in a Dead Man's Footsteps* 2003), David Kramer and Taliep Petersen (*Ghoema* 2005), and Brett Bailey and the *Third World Bunfight* company (*Ipi Zombie* 1996, *iMumbo Jumbo* 1997, and *Big Dada* 2003).

In the mid-1980s, the Afrikaans-speaking youth, inspired by writer Hennie Aucamp, created the Afrikaans political cabaret. Deriving from the controversial and powerful Afrikaans alternative rock music movement, this primarily anarchic and political form expressed abhorrence and resistance to the apartheid regime, culminating in *Piekniek by Dingaan* ("Picnic with Dingane") in 1989 – which was another banned play. As a form, cabaret still exists but has lost its edge as the apartheid specter faded and has reverted to the more nostalgic blends of musical presentation, stand-up comedy, and club theater.

While theater for development has almost become the defining form of African theater, such projects never had the same prominence in South Africa until recently. Interactive theater processes were sometimes used for educative purposes and as a means of conscientizing the youth, especially in the late 1970s. However, the political changes during the 1990s saw the theater-for-development process being adapted to focus on social issues such as the AIDS pandemic, violent crime, rape, nation-building, and voter education for the formerly disenfranchised masses – and much of the government funding and private sponsorship has gone into this.

The National Arts Council and the Evolution of the South African Festival Circuit

From a structural point of view, the most important facet of the post-1994 period has been the radical change in the funding structures, from the selective funding by white-dominated arts councils to the founding of the *National Arts Council* in 1997, to fund all the arts in theory.

However, this has not been matched with adequate funds and has led to a collapse of the state theater system and the inevitable rise of a freelance system by the late 1990s. The consequence has been the rapid development of an alternative freelance system, driven by a vast and aggressive festival culture in Southern Africa. The oldest and best known is the annual *National Arts Festival* in Grahamstown, founded in 1974 to support the embattled English language and culture. Although it was the only national festival for a long time, it soon went beyond its parochial boundaries to encompass all cultures in the country and to provide an indication of emerging trends in the whole subcontinent. Today, it is one of the largest festivals in the world. In the 1990s, formerly protected cultures found that they had to look to their own survival and development. This led to the founding of a series of other arts festivals, notably the annual *Oudtshoorn Festival*, dedicated to the now embattled Afrikaans language and culture. Within a few years, this began to rival the Grahamstown festival in size; while ever more festivals came, catering for a variety of cultures, languages, economic situations, and cultural tastes. Growing exponentially, the year 2004 saw more than 150 local festivals in the country, and at least 40 significant arts and cultural festivals being aggressively advertised across South Africa. This includes a state supported *Mayibuye Festival of African Arts* in Bloemfontein. These festivals have become the core of the industry and in many ways, constitute the annual theatrical season in which more plays are produced annually than ever in the country's history.

Formally, the style of theater has become immensely eclectic and hybridized, which is strongly influenced by dance and physical theater, as well as by the electronic media. Thematically, the years since 1994 have seen an increasing focus on the struggle for identity and nationhood, the search for peace and the exploration of notions of memory and forgiveness - issues most notably symbolized by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and endemic to

works such as: *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997) by Jane Taylor and William Kentridge; the *Handspring Puppet Company*, *Die Jogger* (“The Jogger” 1997) by André P. Brink; and *Die Toneelstuk* (“The Play” 2001) by Breyten Breytenbach. Notable too are the many plays focusing on the healing of past wounds, from Athol Fugard’s *My Children! My Africa!* (1989) and *Valley Song* (1995) to such festival works as *Peace Shall Prevail, Now Is the Time for Reconciliation, People Like Us, Unity*, and John Kani’s thought provoking *Nothing but the Truth* (2002).

See also Athol Fugard.

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